DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 961 UD 025 760

AUTHOR	Ascher, Carol; Schwartz, Wendy
TITLE	Keeping Track of At Risk Students. ERIC Digest Number 35.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Jul 87
CONTRACT	OERI-400-86-0015
NOTE	5p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (single copies free).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Reports - General (140)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Definitions; *Dropout Characteristics; Dropout Prevention; *Dropout Rate; Educational Assessment; Educational Trends; *High Risk Persons; High Schools; Identification; Junior High Schools; Record Keeping; School Effectiveness; *School Holding Power
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Determining how many students drop out of school and why they leave is not easy. The definition of a "dropout" varies from school district to school district, and the mobility of students makes counting them accurately nearly impossible. In an effort to define dropouts in a way that can be applied uniformly across the country, a checklist has been devised which specifies eight common categories of students who can be described as dropouts. Equally important, specifications are given for students who should not be considered dropouts, such as truants, transferees, and returnees. Large margins of error occur in the national dropout rate because of widely varying ways of calculating dropout data. It is necessary to accept and apply uniform methods of defining dropouts and determining the dropout rate. Another area of concern is the identification and monitoring of students who are most at risk of dropping out of school. Offering these students special programs early in their school careers has proven helpful. Monitoring in terms of attendance, testing, and educational history will help to ensure positive progress for students as they proceed through school. Effective systems for identifying dropouts and at risk students are necessary for the accurate measurement of national educational progress. (VM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

9-10-87

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

ISSN 0889-8049

ED285961

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

O.E.R.I.
US Dept. of Ed.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ERIC/CUE Digests draw together and summarize key information on current educational issues. Occasionally a Digest is devoted to a single report or study that is of major importance. Single copies of the **Digests** are available free from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education if the request is accompanied by a SSAE. Please write to the Clearinghouse for permission to reproduce.

UD025 760

Number 35, July 1987

KEEPING TRACK OF AT RISK STUDENTS

Essential to evaluating a school's holding power, and increasing its ability to keep students until they are graduated, is determining how many students drop out, who they are, and why they leave. It is hoped, of course, that this information can both help identify and retain students still in school who are at risk of dropping out, and return those students who have already left. The reasons why students drop out, or even consider doing so, provide valuable insights which should inform dropout prevention efforts.

While it may appear that identification of dropouts is easy, in reality the definition of a "dropout" varies widely from school district to school district, and the mobility of students themselves often makes counting them accurately nearly impossible. Not only is it important for individual schools and school districts to have accurate dropout figures, but it is important for the figures to be based on the same set of criteria so that an accurate national dropout rate can be determined. In addition, uniform criteria would allow a comparison of dropout rates across the country and the effectiveness of the various state and local prevention programs. Those programs which best lower the dropout rate could then be replicated in other areas.

In the last year, two organizations, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Council of Great City Schools, have attempted to define dropouts in a way that can be applied uniformly across the country.[1] The Urban Superintendents Network of the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement subsequently expanded these definitions to produce a comprehensive checklist of characteristics and circumstances determining the status of students. The Network's list is presented below.

Who Is a Dropout?

The following core concept can be used by all school districts and states to define a dropout:

> A pupil who leaves school, for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school or institution.[2]

Within this basic definition are various common categories of students, including any one or more of the following:

- those in grades 9 or 10 through 12 who leave during the school year and do not return within a specified length of time.
- those in a special education or other special, alternative, or ungraded program, who would otherwise be in at least grade 9, and who leave.
- those who do not return to school after a break or summer vacation.
- those who are runaways or whose whereabouts are otherwise unknown.

- those who enter the military, a trade or business school, prison, or any other program not qualifying as an elementary/secondary school.
- those who are expelled.
- those who do not return after being suspended.
- those who leave for any of the above reasons and for whom no transfer is entered.

Who Is Not a Dropout?

Truants. Students who drop out before grade 7 or 9, usually under age 16, are considered truants.

Transferees. Some students leave school for reasons other than to drop out, often because they have found an alternative route to the education they want. The list below provides examples of some such students who should not be classified as dropouts:

- those who enter a Federal program, such as the Job Corps or Neighborhood Youth Corps.
- those who transfer to a nonpublic school.
- those who enroll in a program leading to a high school equivalency diploma (General Equivalency Diploma, GED).
- those who transfer to a State-approved program that continues the student's education on a fulltime basis, such as home-based instruction.
- those who enter an alternative educational program, such as a non-GED night school or a vocational program.
- those who leave school for early admission to college.
- those who enter a correctional institution at an age (under 18) when returning to school seems probable.
- those known to transfer, through transcript request or other information, to any of the above-mentioned programs.

Returnees. Other students who are sometimes erroneously identified as dropouts are those who take one or more "breaks" from the school they attend. Among those students are the following:

- those absent from school for lengthy, albeit temporary periods, because of illness, family travel, suspensions, etc.
- those who reenter after previously dropping out.

Leaver-Completers. Finally, there are students who leave school without immediately enrolling in another educational program but who do so later. Eventually they earn a high school diploma, GED, or other certificate of completion outside the public or private secondary school system.[3] These students, among the categories of students who do not take a direct route to education completion, are most likely to be mislabeled as dropouts, since the time lapse between their leaving a traditional school and entering another educational program can be lengthy. There is some thought, however, that students with a GED should nevertheless be classified as dropouts, for such a diploma is not as valuable to their careers as is a regular high school diploma.[4]

Counting Dropouts

If determining who is a dropout is difficult, calculating the dropout rate can be an even harder task because no system based on student *numbers*—as most systems in large school districts are—counted at a particular point in time, can correctly reflect the status of every student, present or absent.[5] Moreover, it is the ability of a staff member who is inputting data to accurately evaluate every student's status in the face of a great volume of information that ultimately determines the quality of a dropout analysis.

While the basis for all dropout rates is the difference between the number of students enrolled at two different points in time, the points chosen by schools vary widely:

- September and September.
- September and June.
- November and June.
- the beginning term of the school's lowest grade level and that class' normal graduation date.

Some schools have a counting system that takes into account students who leave school but should not be classified as dropouts (see list above), while other schools simply do not have the resources for maintaining such a system. Among the students who are sometimes erroneously counted as dropouts are these:

- those, described above, who take an extended leave which coincides with the time students are tallied.
- those, also described above, who complete an adult education program long after leaving school.
- those transferees whose new school does not request a transcript or otherwise notify the student's former school of the transfer.
- those who move so frequently that a transfer of records from former school to new ones is usually impossible.
- those who take longer than is normal to complete school, and thus fail to show up on the tally of graduates that is matched with the number of students who enrolled the usual number of years earlier.

Conversely, students who drop out between school years may fail to be counted if their school's dropout rate is based on comparison of enrollment in the fall and at the end of the spring term.

The calculation of the national dropout rate is based on data supplied by all the school districts, whose criteria for classifying dropouts differ widely, as was demonstrated above. Thus, not only is there a decent-sized margin of error in the national figure, but comparisons between districts can be misleading, since each may have used a different measurement method.

Identifying At Risk Students

Often it is found that students who eventually dropped out began having problems from almost the beginning of their school careers. This information—startling, perhaps—has warranted monitoring students from the time they enter kindergarten, and immediately offering special programs to those demonstrating cognitive and social difficulties. Even

earlier monitoring has also proved to be effective; special preschool programs have been shown to lower later incidences of delinquency, pregnancy, and dropping out, particularly for poor and minority children.[6]

Serious academic problems may appear as early as third grade,[7] and it is not uncommon for middle school children, particularly Hispanics, to leave school long before the onset of most traditional high school dropout prevention programs. Some school districts have responded with special programs. For example, in Kansas City, MO, incoming seventh grade students with poor attendance records are placed in Student Support Groups that meet weekly with school staff and community members for extra encouragement. An even earlier intervention program is in place in Dade County, FL; a Transitional Skills Class for students in grades 1 through 6 offers a high concentration of instruction in their deficient areas by a teacher and aide team. In its first year of operation, 85 percent of the program students improved their basic skills.

Moving on to the ninth grade is particularly difficult for at risk students.[8] At a critical state of adolescence, they must face a new, large, and impersonal school, new teachers each hour, many difficult required courses, and the loss of seniority they had enjoyed the previous year. To offset these problems for at risk students, schools can shift some required courses to later years, assign to incoming students more experienced teachers who will be sensitive to their needs, work with parent groups to help ease the transition, and provide extra counseling services. In addition, as is done in New York City, at risk students can be kept together for several periods a day so they can develop a sense of community with each other.

Monitoring At Risk Students

Crucial to both initially identifying at risk students and ensuring their progress as they proceed through school, either in the regular or a special program, is ongoing monitoring of their performance. (A beneficial byproduct of such monitoring is the ability to evaluate staff effectiveness with these students.)

Attendance. The most basic monitoring is simply keeping attendance records, a procedure that computers have greatly simplified. Since poor attendance often foreshadows dropping out, at the first sign of excessive absenteeism the school can offer a student personal attention. For example, the San Francisco Unified School District uses a home calling system to contact parents whose children have been absent for five days. In Philadelphia, parents of truants receive a recorded phone message, in both English and Spanish in appropriate districts. Schools also offer students various incentives for good attendance records, thus preventing rather than correcting a truancy problem. In Houston, tickets to Astro World and theatre passes are effective rewards.

Testing. Use of new, sensitive testing devices and technology permits early identification of students' learning strengths and problems and quick application of appropriate interventions. Subsequent testing, on a regular basis, allows for easy measurement of academic progress. In Minneapolis, for example, each spring students take locally-developed criterion-referenced benchmark tests. In addition, a computerized instructional management system provides ongoing monitoring of individual progress, allowing teachers to regroup students and select supplementary learning materials as necessary.

Educational History. Keeping track of at risk students can be a much more sophisticated procedure than simply monitoring attendance or testing regularly. While measures must be taken to protect students' privacy, schools can record a student's complete educational history, making possible the development of a personalized program based on past participation and progress in special programs. Moreover, these comprehensive student histories can be transferred to new schools so they can enroll transfer students in the most appropriate courses. Since frequent transferees are more likely to drop out than are stable students, efforts to limit the upheaval caused by transfers can be effective dropout prevention measures.

The Need for Accurate Dropout Records

It is necessary to accept and apply a uniform method of both defining dropouts and determining the dropout rate. There also need to be effective systems for identifying at risk students and providing them with the help they need to remain and succeed in school. Only then will it be possible to measure accurately national educational progress and ensure that all students are provided with the next opportunities to remain and succeed in school.

—Carol Ascher and
Wendy Schwartz

References

1. Council of Chief State School Officers (1986, September). *Improving universe data on schools and school districts; collecting national dropout statistics*. Washington, D.C.: Council on Chief State School Officers, State Education Assessment Center; Council of Great City Schools (1986, November). *Dropouts from the great city schools (Vol. 1): Technical analysis of dropout statistics in selected districts*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

2. Council of Chief State School Officers, *ibid*.

3. Kolstad, A.J., & Owings, J.A. (1986, April). *High school dropouts who change their minds about school*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

4. Rumberger, R.W. (1986, September). *High school dropouts: A problem for research, policy, and practice*. Stanford: Stanford Education Policy Institute, School of Education, Stanford University.

5. *Ibid*.

6. Berrueta-Clement, J.R. Barnett, S., Epstein, S., Schweinhart, L., & Weikart, D. (1984). *Changed lives: The effects of the Perry Preschool Program on youths through age 19*. Ypsilanti, MI: The High/Scope Press.

7. Azumi, J., & Gourgey, A. (1985, April). *Newark's dropouts: Who are they?* Newark: Newark Public Schools, Division of Research and Evaluation; Hodgkinson, H. (1985). *All in one system: Demographics of education—kindergarten through graduate school*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership.

8. Ascher, C. (1986, July). *The ninth grade—a precarious time for the potential dropout*. (ERIC Digest No. 34). New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.

ERIC Clearinghouse
on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority
Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia
University
New York, NY 10027
(212) 678-3433
Erwin Flaxman, Director

SUBMIT YOUR DOCUMENTS TO ERIC...

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education regularly publishes digests and monographs about current topics. A list of publications can be obtained by writing to the Clearinghouse. We are also interested in locating materials for the ERIC data base. If you have produced research reports, conference papers, position papers, bibliographies, classroom materials, instructional guides, and other written works about

- the relationship between urban life and schooling,
- the education of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities,
- the effects of urban experiences and environments on both children and adults,
- issues, programs, practices, and materials related to equal educational opportunity for special populations, including women and minorities,
- the relationship between schools and other urban social institutions and services, or
- innovative programs, practices, and materials that help redress the curriculum imbalance in the treatment of ethnic, national-origin and other minority groups,

send two (2) clearly typed or printed copies of each document to the Clearinghouse. Share the work you have produced with others!

Availability of Documents Cited

Publications with an ED number may be read in microfiche in any library, information center, or other institution that has an ERIC microfiche collection. They may also be purchased in either microfiche or paper copy from ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS), Computer Microfilm Corporation, 3900 Wheeler Ave., Alexandria, VA 22304.

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0015. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.

OERI
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education